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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001168

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: HARIRI PREOCCUPIED BY ELECTIONS, SYRIA,  
TRIBUNAL DELAY

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) A somewhat subdued Saad Hariri told the Ambassador the polls looked good for March 14's Beirut by-election candidate Mohamed Itani in the Beirut by-election. His assessment of former president and March 14 ally Amine Gemayel chances in the Metn by-election was restrained. Hariri eagerly asked the Ambassador about what he thought was really behind the July 26 explosion in an Aleppo (Syria) military training camp, and found it implausible that it could have actually been an accident. Hariri was distrustful of Parliament speaker Nabih Berri's stated intent to hold the presidential election, and his efforts to find candidates acceptable to both March 14 and the opposition. As for the French efforts to help the GOL and the opposition find common ground, Hariri was firm in rejecting any compromise with Hizballah, and believes French FM Kouchner is weakening March 14 by dealing with Hizballah as an equal to March 14. Hariri stressed the need to push for the establishment of the Special Tribunal to try the suspects in Rafiq Hariri's assassination before presidential elections and before UNIIIC Commissioner Brammertz leaves his post at the end of 2007. End summary.

NOT OVERLY CONFIDENT OF ELECTION VICTORY

2. (C) In an August 1 meeting with the Ambassador and Poloff, March 14 leader Saad Hariri (accompanied by confidant Dr. Ghattas Khoury) seemed less than certain of victory for March 14 candidate Mohamed Amine Itani in the August 5 Beirut by-election, saying only "we hope to win." This was despite his statement that polls gave March 14 85 to 90 percent of votes and that he believes that Shi'a voters will give March 14 about 25 percent of their estimated 8000 votes cast. He was equally reserved about former President Amine Gemayel's chances of success against Aoun-bloc candidate Camille Khoury in what promises to be a bitterly fought Metn by-election, saying only "he'll do okay."

ALEPPO EXPLOSIONS--ACCIDENT OR SABOTAGE?

3. (C) Switching the subject, Hariri asked the Ambassador if he had any information about climate change and the hot summers in Aleppo, a reference to the July 26 explosions at a military facility north of Aleppo which reportedly killed 15

Syrian soldiers. Hariri dismissed the possibility that the explosions could have been set off by hot weather, and said that at least 45 were killed and 150 injured. He noted that on the same day, there was an explosion in Raqqa (northeastern Syria), and another on July 31 in the environs of Damascus. The Syrians, as is their wont, were keeping mum on the Raqqa and Damascus explosions, he claimed.

#### PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS WEIGHING ON HARIRI

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¶4. (C) Hariri thinks Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri's attempts to solicit names of acceptable presidential candidates from March 14 and the opposition (as well as from the U.S.) were just a way for him (Berri) to strengthen his own position and perhaps use the names for his own purposes. He added the Saudis, who do not trust Berri, had passed to Hariri a list of candidates acceptable to them, including former MP Nassib Lahoud, MP Boutros Harb, former FM Fares Bouiez, and MP Robert Ghannem. Hariri added that he told Lebanese Forces leader and Christian ally in March 14 Samir Geagea that March 14 needs to know who the Christians want for the presidency.

#### FRENCH INITIATIVE "GETTING OUT OF HAND"

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¶5. (C) Hariri criticized French efforts to find common ground between March 14 and the opposition, and agreed with Walid Jumblatt's saying the French initiative was "getting out of hand." Furthermore, he was firm in rejecting of any sort of compromise with Hizballah. He told French FM Bernard Kouchner that the French, in attempting to facilitate talks between Hizballah and March 14, were equating Hizballah with March 14--and that was unacceptable. Kouchner was weakening

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March 14 (the moderates), strengthening the opposition (the extremists), and emboldening Syria. If the new French government wants progress, as it claims, they need to scare the Syrians, not visit them. Hariri said Walid Jumblatt has pushed the French to insist on activating the UN Special Tribunal to try the suspects in the 2005 assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri. Both Hariri and Khoury believe the Tribunal must begin its work before presidential elections and before UNIIIC Commissioner Brammertz leaves his post at the end of ¶2007.  
FELTMAN